

**NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY**

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY DECISION-MAKING:  
THE CASE FOR DOCTRINE AND TRAINING

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Developing, executing and supervising national security strategy and policy requires coherence, consistency, and synchronization. Constitutional checks and balances make the effort to achieve these standards a complex task. The National Security Council (NSC), as outlined in Presidential Decision Directive 2 dated 20 January 1993, does a very good job gathering proponents for key elements of national power and setting general guidelines for their interaction in pursuit of effective policy within Constitutional strictures. ‘Very good’ may be the best for which one can hope in a system created to diffuse power, but protection and furtherance of national interests in an increasingly small, interconnected world demands we try to do better. Practical theory for executive branch decision-making that increases rigor and synchronization within the restrictions imposed by intergovernmental separation of powers is absolutely vital. To be durable as well as practical, theory must have the flexibility to account for varied presidential managerial style. Combined with formal training of both political appointees and government employees in national security matters and procedures, practical theory will result in better and more coherent national security strategy and policies.

## **THE CASE FOR PRACTICAL THEORY**

A survey of unclassified presidential directives from the last four administrations reveals consistent early commitment to specific organization and responsibilities for the National Security Council in the form of National Security Directives<sup>1</sup>. In all cases the directives lack guidance concerning standards for analysis, presentation, and disposition

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<sup>1</sup> Federation of American Scientists Website; [www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/direct.htm](http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/direct.htm); 1.

of information involved in policy decisions. In most cases it appears that decision processes evolved as the president became more comfortable with his job and the staff became more aware of the president's personality and preferences. Unfortunately, this period of adjustment can result in some painful and, at best, embarrassing missteps early in an administration. Further complicating the process, developed formats, agendas and techniques are apparently promulgated by common usage as opposed to published standards. Informality about process leads to mixed results throughout an administration's tenure, based on the relative experience of the staff and the President. At the end of the administration, transition between one administration's national security apparatus and the next is complicated by the reinvention of vital but basic processes.

Prescriptive operating procedures could theoretically solve much of the problems raised above, but are impractical. Prescriptive procedures would clearly not last long in the swirl of personalities, egos and agendas inherent in government. Each President has had his own peculiar approach to decision-making, from President Carter's purported involvement in the details to President Reagan's detachment from any detailed analysis of issues not in line with his focused agenda. A lasting, systemic approach to national security decision making must fill the difficult role of providing a consistent, effective base for the process while maintaining enough flexibility to account for personal leadership styles.

There are clearly hopeful signs that some procedures and techniques are universal and lasting in their effectiveness. Even ideologically and personality opposed administrations

find themselves using similar processes at the staff level, with the only difference being in manner of presentation to the president and the relative power and influence of the department principals. All recent presidents either started with or evolved similar hierarchical organizational schemes<sup>2</sup> using a Chief of Staff and depending on the National Security Advisor and staff for coordination and implementation of presidential policy. Forms may vary, but many accounts from the last four administrations cite basic decision-making tenets like comparison of courses of action and analysis of consequences as features of virtually all policy processes. This relative uniformity of process is not surprising given the education, experience and training of most individuals in government, and adherence to tenets of decision-making appears to be the trend regardless of ideology or political bent. Codifying these essentials in formal practical theory would allow future administrations to take advantage of lessons learned by earlier administrations without taking the potentially painful political step of acknowledging the wisdom of some of the prior administration's policies.

Clinton Administration Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 56, Managing Complex Contingency Operations, has broken new ground in the attempt to create national security decision-making procedures that will last beyond the current administration. Focused on interagency operations in a complex contingency operation, the PDD directs creation of an Executive Committee of deputies and agency representatives involved in a particular operation; development of a political-military plan to synchronize interagency operations; conduct of rehearsals and reviews prior to execution; formal review of the results to

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<sup>2</sup> George C. Edwards III and Stephen J. Wayne, Presidential Leadership (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) 222.

extract and institutionalize lessons learned, and development of interagency operations training.<sup>3</sup> However, this PDD does not address “routine or small-scale operations” and confines its definition of complex contingency operations to “peace operations.”<sup>4</sup> A further problem is the lead role the Defense Department is taking in developing procedures and plans under the auspices of the PDD. Lack of full agency participation, particularly from the National Security Council, may result in a tendency to default to the military element of power in crisis situations based on DOD’s robust staff and developmental role.<sup>5</sup> Aimed at the development of processes and training for mid-level managers, the PDD fails to take on the tough task of requiring senior-level managers to become proficient at sound procedures and fails to create bipartisan and senior proponentcy that will last beyond the change in administrations. PDD 56 is a step in the right direction, but does not answer the larger need for an overarching, durable approach to national security decision-making that might help prevent or defuse the requirement for complex contingencies in the first place.

Practical theory would provide *descriptive* guidelines to ensure basic standards for quality decision-making are adhered to as the President finalizes his organizational and process-oriented directives to his staff. Practical theory would also go further than descriptions by recommending a range of successful techniques and procedures. This would greatly smooth transition between administrations by providing basic consistency of process and production, without stifling change in products or policies. Further,

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<sup>3</sup> White Paper, “The Clinton Administration’s Policy on Managing Complex Contingency Operations,” <http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/EOP/NSC/html/documents/NSCDoc2.html>.

<sup>4</sup> White Paper, 1.

formal practical theory would provide basic form and direction for galvanizing agency coordination and action in situations that often do not have clear lines of authority or do not adhere to published procedures. Most importantly, practical theory would help build mutual understanding among agencies of roles and requirements, ensure that procedures were based on concepts that guarantee the best decision possible, and provide waypoints in what can be a complex and murky process.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF PRACTICAL THEORY**

To account for the wide range of presidential decision-making styles and situations, Executive Branch decision-making doctrine would have to be organized to:

1. Describe national security policy-making process in terms of decision-making theory, along with generic procedures for deliberate and crisis policy formulation.
2. Operationalize decision-making concepts along lines of an organization, establishing a robust National Security Council staff as the conduit for synchronization of the planning and execution of policy.
3. Provide a variety of formats for the above to help account for differences in presidential decision-making style. Anecdotal descriptions would assist future presidents and staffs in selecting doctrinally sound procedures in keeping with their managerial style.

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<sup>5</sup> Captain Michael Dunaway, “Jointness Writ Large? Presidential Decision Directive 56 Managing Complex Contingency Operations.” (National Defense University, Fort McNair, 1998) 8 – 9.

4. Contain automated tools for the staff and decision-makers that facilitate the process for both written and verbal estimates. The National Defense University's Planning Decision Support System (PDSS)<sup>6</sup> provides an excellent example of a seminal strategic decision support tool.

Full development of this doctrine requires both experience and academic skill. A commission of past Presidents, National Security Council members and National Security Council staff along with decision-making experts and national security strategy theoreticians would best serve to ensure successful distillation of doctrinal national security decision-making. If this group can produce two or three national security decision-making models that reflect sound decision theory, then the goal will have been achieved. Incorporation of those models into software designed to allow interagency networking and rapid production of standardized position papers, decision memoranda, and decision briefings will ensure better national security decision-making for future administrations.

Perhaps most importantly, the commission's credentials will attract attention and result in wide-ranging engagement of the executive and legislative branch in the process. The findings of this commission would become the yardstick against which oversight committees and executive review teams could measure procedures leading up to a policy decision. This would help provide for durability of the developed theory and procedures across administrations without resorting to the extreme of legislating executive branch

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<sup>6</sup> National Defense University Wargaming and Simulation Center; <http://www.ndu.edu/wgsc/usergui.html> (Fort Leslie J. McNair, Washington, DC)



organization and procedure. However, should credibility and proven success not be adequate to ensure full adoption and implementation of practical theory and training in the executive branch, then the legislative branch would have a basis for further adjustment of the National Security Act of 1947.

## **SOME PROPOSALS FOR PRACTICAL THEORY**

Even without the benefit of this commission's expertise, there are some obvious principles that should be incorporated into our practical theory of national security strategy and policy

First, the National Security Council staff needs to be a robust agency, with the doctrinal charter to perform all seven of the "vital functions" identified by LTC Shoemaker in his book, The NSC Staff, Counseling the Council. These are administration; policy coordination and integration; policy supervision; policy adjudication; crisis management; policy formulation; and policy advocacy<sup>7</sup>. His work provides the basis for organization of theory and specific recommendations for National Security Council staff roles in the national security decision-making process. The major point is to establish the Special Assistant to the President for National Security as the facilitator for national security policy development, responsible for coordinating and shepherding the various agencies through the use of his or her staff to produce fully coordinated, synchronized policies for Presidential consideration.

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher C. Shoemaker, *The NSC Staff: Counseling the Council* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991) 21 – 48.

Second, any national security decision-making model must follow sound theory.

Irving Janus lists “high-quality” decision-making steps that are useful to guide model development. These are:

1. Surveys a wide range of objectives to be fulfilled.
2. Canvasses a wide range of courses of action (COA).
3. Intensively searches for new information relevant to evaluating the alternatives.
4. Correctly assimilates and takes into account new information or expert judgements (even when not supportive of initially preferred COA).
5. Reconsiders positive and negative consequences of alternatives originally regarded as unacceptable.
6. Carefully examines the costs and risks of negative and positive consequences.
7. Makes detailed provisions for implementing and monitoring the chosen course of action.

Meeting these standards for quality decision-making requires schedules and formats for briefings and papers that cover phases of the process: situation analysis; course of action analysis and recommendation, decision, implementation and information. In routine situations, the staff would be able to work through each of these phases in a deliberate manner to ensure full participation of agency staffs in the process. Crisis management would require the cycle to be brief and informal, usually causing the staff to consolidate analysis, decision and implementation into one brief or paper. Either way, the rigorous requirement for structure and analysis must be maintained, even if working through the process is a ‘talk-through’ in a Council meeting on a given crisis. The

quality of the decision is dependent on faithfully adhering to the requirements of “high quality” decision-making embedded in this process.

The goal of the situation analysis brief/paper is to inform the Council and the President of the facts and assumptions involved in a given situation in one session, with the intent of getting guidance from the President. If used effectively, the situation brief

#### **FIGURE ONE: SITUATION ANALYSIS**

##### **1. PLACE THE ISSUE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY**

- Determine the nature and extent of the issue
- Define National Interests involved and their relative priority

##### **2. LIST ALL PARTICIPANTS**

- Governmental
- Non governmental: interest groups, media, other nations and their own interests

##### **3. DETERMINE THE CONTROLLING AUTHORITIES**

- Moral imperatives    --Ethical considerations    --Constitution
- Domestic and international law    --Applicable regulations    --Existing policies
- Precedent and conventions    --Public support

##### **4. IDENTIFY THE DECISION-MAKERS**

- Executive Branch -- President, inter-agency, Dept heads, delegated subordinate
- Legislative Branch -- Congressional committee, Leadership, Member, or staff
- Judicial Branch

##### **5. ANALYZE ALL FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE PROCESS**

- Politics    --Other branches/parts of government    --Public opinion (domestic and international)    --Other nations and actors    --Media and interest groups
- Availability of suitable, applicable elements of power

##### **6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Assess the issue in terms of the existing policy
- Determine the degree of threat or opportunity
- Determine the initial set of goals believed to be in the nation’s best interest
- Discuss potential Courses of Action in terms of elements of national power

also facilitates inter-agency working, as it involves the principals early on in the process

and helps ensure that all players understand the President's intent. Borrowing heavily from a National Defense University model for policy decision-makers,<sup>8</sup> Figure One covers essential information that should be contained in the situation brief or paper.

Following situational analysis, the NSC staff would coordinate inter-agency development of three potential courses of action using all relative elements of national power along with staff analysis of their relative strengths and weaknesses. Strong dissenting opinions would have to be highlighted, but most could be accounted for in one of the three courses of action, which should be built to offer the President three truly different alternatives for action. All courses of action must meet the following criteria to be useful:

1. Acceptable – ethical, moral, legal and otherwise in keeping with the norms of behavior established for our nation.
2. Suitable – an appropriate use of ways and means given the issue, neither overkill nor so weak as to be doomed to failure.
3. Feasible – achievable with the means available in the time allotted

Course of Action statements would be the beginning of the synchronization process. Each course of action must contain potential policies that involve executive action, an act of Congress, or a court decision. Each action must state the element of power involved, the executive agent, coordination and consultation required to execute, the interim and final objectives, predicted timeline for implementation and for results, and should address the impact on other policies proposed for that course of action.

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Thompson, “Core Course 5603 Syllabus, The National Security Process,” (Washington, DC, National Defense University) 7.

Last, implementation needs to be addressed as a separate, important topic. An implementation plan must address identification of executive agents, consultation required, a public information and diplomacy plan, timelines for progress reports, and criteria for update reports to the Council and the President. The overall coordinators for implementation should be the National Security Council staff, but the staff should not be involved as executors of policy.

There is obviously much room for expansion of the ideas expressed above, but we also have to take care not to dip into prescriptive policy as opposed to practical theory for reasons discussed earlier. The bottom line is to ensure that national security decision models:

1. Facilitate analysis of the situation in terms of facts and assumptions;
2. Clearly identify the full variety of ways and means available for achieving objectives;
3. Analyze the pros and cons of those different policies;
4. Present the President with comparative evaluation and a staff recommendation; and
5. Provide for synchronized execution of policy across all elements of national power in support of national interests.

The form this process takes is going to be dependent on the President's style, but the fact is some theoretically sound form is required. Adherence to solid theory will help ensure the best possible results regardless of form.

## **TRAINING**

Adherence is not possible without commitment and understanding. Integration of doctrine by practitioners never occurs fully until theory is used as the basis for formal training. We currently select the best and brightest for our national security staff with the proven thought that they have the education, experience and drive to accomplish the complex tasks assigned. Think of the results that we might achieve if those same people were actually trained and educated in the specific national security processes our formal theory will describe for success.

Training is just as valid for political appointees as for government employees or detailees to the National Security Council staff. While attempting to get cabinet-level appointees into training for national security doctrine may be a difficult proposition due to time constraints and egos, there would be great payoffs for the administration and the nation. For example, President Reagan ensured that new appointees were briefed by the White House staff prior to arrival at their new departments<sup>9</sup>. This technique was effective in ensuring the appointees were on the same sheet of music as the President before they could be co-opted by their department. The legitimacy and effectiveness of any president's organizational and operational procedures for executive decision-making

would be ensured by the same focus on standardized training early in an executive branch appointee's or employee's tenure.

Training would be no more than two weeks in length, executed by the National Defense University much like CAPSTONE courses are given to General Officers. Topics would include an overview of international relations theory, a short course on Constitutional roles and responsibilities, and then specific training on the national security policy doctrine, formats and automation. The goal would be to teach theory, techniques and procedures, and provide an invaluable forum for discussing improvements and sharing experience among some incredibly high quality practitioners of the art of governance. Even if there is not agreement on the specifics, at least we would build mutual understanding of terms and concepts from which to base improved communication.

## **CONCLUSION**

In 1982, Behn and Vaupel wrote that the “. . .quality of a decision will always depend upon the decision-maker's wisdom and experience, anyone can improve his own decision-making skills through the thoughtful use of systematic analysis. Intellectual self discipline is required to avoid ignoring important alternatives, uncertainties, decisions or trade-offs.”<sup>10</sup> The key is to provide busy decision-makers and staff with tools to ensure rigorous analysis even when in the midst of crisis. Theory, education, formats, and

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<sup>9</sup> Edwards and Wayne, 238.

software support systems provide the tools necessary for successful decision-making. Given that the National Security Council staff and the President deal with decisions affecting the fate of our nation, we cannot afford to do anything less than strive for better decision-making processes.

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<sup>10</sup> Robert D. Behn and James W. Vaupel, Quick Analysis for Busy Decision-Makers (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1982) 18, 25.